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ABSTRACT

This paper maintains that the two basic dimensions of developmentally appropriate practice are age appropriateness and individual appropriateness. For the latter dimension, individuals' patterns of growth, personality, families, and culture are believed to be important. Teachers who use developmentally appropriate practices believe that young children learn by doing; that play is valuable in allowing the child to develop in a natural way; and that young children's methods of learning should govern the ways in which one teaches, and not vice versa. Differences between programs using developmentally appropriate practices and those using more traditional practices are discussed. In developmentally appropriate practices: (1) the learner is viewed as having developing abilities; (2) learning is viewed as a creative activity; (3) classrooms are child-centered and often use volunteers and parents to obtain low adult-student ratios; and (4) discipline usually takes the form of guidance, redirection, or prevention. In a traditional program, the learner is viewed as having measurable abilities; learning is governed by a set of principles and consists of the acquisition of a set of skills; and classrooms are teacher-centered and directed. Briefly described is a developmentally appropriate kindergarten program designed by a rural public school system in Arkansas that worked in conjunction with a local university. (SH)

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Developmentally Appropriate Education:

A Case Study

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Developmentally Appropriate Education:

A Case Study

Early childhood education is a growing and changing field. In recent years the need for quality education for young children has greatly increased. Women are entering the workforce in larger numbers than ever before and, because of economic reasons, these women are continuing to work outside the home even through child rearing years. This new generation of parents are searching for more than just "babysitting"; they want programs that will enhance their child's life. When these children become school age, parents are demanding that public schools also provide an appropriate education for their children. However, there has been some confusion as to what constitutes quality and appropriate education.

One rural public school system sought to clarify this issue for their community and through collaborative efforts with a local university began a project which would allow them to do this. This paper will share some of the research on which the project was based; discuss the collaborative efforts between the university and the school; and discuss some of the changes in the teacher education program at the university.

Research Base

Nationally early childhood education has undergone many changes in recent years. Although many of the changes are positive, some are not

beneficial for children. Probably the most disturbing trend is the increase on academics at a young age despite the growing body of research supporting concrete, play oriented approaches to early education (Buckner, 1988; Sheppard and Smith, 1988; Simmons and Brewer, 1985). Because of a concern about this issue, a number of groups have written position statements on or endorsed the concept of "developmentally appropriate practice" (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1989; International Reading Association, 1989; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1986; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1990; Southern Association on Children Under Six, 1990).

Developmentally appropriate practice has two basic dimensions. The first is age appropriateness; this means that activities and methods are chosen based on the child's developmental age (Bredekamp, 1987). Basic growth and development principles are considered in curriculum planning. For example, five year olds have shorter attention spans and need to be active. Therefore, large group activities are planned for short periods of time with opportunities for children to move. The second dimension of developmentally appropriate practice is individual appropriateness (Bredekamp, 1987). Each child is considered to be a unique person. Individual patterns and timing of growth, personality, families, and culture

are believed to be important. For example, a five year old who has had little previous experience with writing instruments is not expected to print his name until he has had the opportunity to explore materials, experiment with various tools and improve fine motor skills needed to successfully print.

Teachers who use developmentally appropriate practice have several fundamental beliefs which are supported by research. First, they believe that young children learn by doing (Elkind, 1989; NAEYC, 1986). They know that traditional methods of teaching such as lecturing, telling or even demonstrating are not the best practices when working with young children. Learning is a complex process that results from interaction with the environment. Many researchers have found that children must create their own knowledge; children must experiment and explore the world around them in order to understand it (Kami, 1990; Piaget, 1974).

Teachers using developmentally appropriate practice also know the value of play (Chenfeld, 1991; Nourot & Hoorn, 1991). Play allows the child to grow and develop in a natural way. It serves the "whole child"; the physical, social, emotional, cognitive and even spiritual needs of the child can be met through play (Hendrick, 1988). These teachers use child initiated, child directed, and teacher supported play. This means children are allowed to make many decisions about what to play, how to play, when

to play. Teachers provide materials to foster play, facilitate play by asking questions and guiding play activities, and help children develop problem solving skills in mediating disputes during play.

A final belief that teachers who use developmentally appropriate practice have is that how young children learn should govern how one teaches rather than the other way around (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991). They are guides and facilitators of learning rather than directors and producers. These teachers know that although rote memorization and drill produces results, these results generally do not reflect understanding, application, or higher level thinking skills.

When observing programs using developmentally appropriate practices, one can note basic differences between those types of programs and those of a more traditional nature. In developmentally appropriate practices the learner is viewed as having developing abilities while in a traditional program the learner is viewed as having measurable abilities (Elkind, 1989). The teacher in a developmentally appropriate practices program tries to match the curriculum to the child's developing abilities (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991). Learning is viewed as a creative activity while in a traditional program learning is governed by a set of principles and consists of acquiring a set of skills (Elkind, 1989). A traditional classroom teacher gives children information while one using developmentally appropriate

practice lets children construct their own knowledge. (Elkind, 1989; Greenberg, 1990). Traditional classrooms tend to be teacher centered and directed while a classroom where developmentally appropriate practice is being used will allow high levels of choice for children making it much more child centered (Greenberg, 1990; Schekendanz, Chay, Gopin, Sheng, Song and Wild, 1990). Since low adult child ratios are beneficial for children and developmentally appropriate practice recognizes the importance of families, teachers in these classrooms often utilize volunteers and parents more than traditional classrooms (Schekendanz et al, 1990). Traditional classrooms often dispense information while developmentally appropriate classrooms encourage exploration and play as key parts of learning (Schekendanz et al, 1990).

Discipline in developmentally appropriate classrooms is usually in the form of guidance. Methods of discipline such as shaming a child, physical punishment, or embarrassment are not used (Hildebrand, 1990). Because of the appropriateness of the curriculum, most problems are minor. When problems do occur, the curriculum is examined as well as methods and practices being used with the child. Much is done in the way of re-direction and prevention. The emphasis on self-discipline is often very noticeable in a developmentally appropriate classroom while a traditional

classroom uses more external and teacher-control techniques (Greenberg, 1990).

One important point found in searching the literature is that there is a distinction between academic content and academic methods (Katz and Chard, 1989). Children are often pushed in the academic sense but held back intellectually. For example, when drills and worksheets are used to teach concepts such as colors, shapes, numbers and letters, children may be successful at recall activities (Greenberg, 1989). However, when there is a different situation in which they must use the information, they are often unable to apply what they have "learned". When children are given many different experiences in a variety of settings (sorting different shapes and colors of blocks, easel painting, cooking, block building, listening to stories, helping count the children in the class, etc.), they are more likely to transfer their knowledge to new situations (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991). Children who have participated in cooking activities, measuring and pouring during sand and water play, and used rulers in the writing or art center will have a concrete base from which to work when they encounter fractions in elementary school. Using meaningful experiences to teach academic skills is a key part of developmentally appropriate practice (Katz and Chard, 1989).

Collaborative Efforts

The school began the project by asking a local university to become involved; the principal wanted to have the best kindergarten that he could possibly have. He was interested in designing a program that would be research based, meet the needs of the community and be in line with the teachers' desires for a more developmental program. University faculty met with the kindergarten teachers and shared research articles, reports and other materials with them. After reaching a consensus that all involved wanted a developmentally appropriate kindergarten program, in-services were held to further explore what exactly developmentally appropriate practices were and how they would be implemented at this particular school.

University personnel and the principal visited a kindergarten classroom in another district which was developmentally appropriate. Video taping allowed the teachers to share in the trip. University personnel also substituted in the classrooms to get a feel for the community and families in the program. This enabled them to assist teachers in further defining the curriculum.

Teachers worked to delete inappropriate activities from the curriculum and incorporated new and more appropriate activities. They attended a conference which had many sessions on developmentally

appropriate practice in kindergarten. The university faculty were available on a weekly basis for consultation with the teachers. Student teachers were placed in the classrooms to allow them to experience a developmentally appropriate program. This also helped teachers keep the adult child ratio low.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The developmental program which was implemented in this rural Arkansas school has some important implications for areas that have subpopulations of students who are at risk. Quality early childhood programs have been shown to have positive influences on children in various at-risk categories. Students profit form a program in which they learn by doing, play is a natural part of the curriculum, children are allowed to grow and develop naturally, and teachers use the way children learn to govern how they teach. parents in many families must, because of economic necessity, be employed outside the home. Low income level combined with both parents working outside the home puts many of Arkansas's children at risk for school failure. Across the state of Arkansas and particularly in this service area, the need for early childhood education programs is critical.

In order to reduce the risks that many young children face, it is critical that teachers be aware of the need for quality education and prepared to deliver it. Teachers in early childhood programs, regardless of credentialed

status, should be encouraged and supported to obtain and maintain current knowledge of child development and its application to early childhood educational practice.

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